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ABSTRACT

This pamphlet, targeted to girls' parents, discusses issues surrounding puberty. The introduction discusses cultural images of menstruation and girls' attitudes towards it. Suggestions are offered for discussing menstruation with one's daughter. Suggestions focus on timing of introducing the topic; which parent takes responsibility for menstrual education; examining one's own attitudes towards menstruation; worries and positive thoughts about daughter's development; what girls want to know; and the best approach to take and ways to facilitate communication. Father-daughter menstrual education and boys' menstrual education are also discussed. References are included and sources of information for early adolescents are listed. (ABL)

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FOR PARENTS OF GIRLS.

BY MARGARET L. STUBBS with illustrations by Jennifer E. Putnam.

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Publication of the BODY TALK pamphlets was made possible by a grant to the author from an anonymous donor whose interests include not only girls' development, but the dissemination of research results to a wide audience. In addition, the author wishes to make special mention of her association with Drs. Jill Rierdan and Elissa Koff, co-principal investigators of a long-term study of early adolescent girls' development at the Wellesley College Center for Research on Women. Much of the information about menstruation imparted in the pamphlets derives from this ongoing research, and the "we" mentioned in the text refers to members of the research group. Special mention as well should be made of Jennifer Putnam, who provided the illustrations, and of her mother, Jan Putnam, Assistant Director of the Center for Research on Women, who was responsible for the design and layout of the pamphlets. Thanks to Susan Bailey, Director of the Center for Research on Women, for her enthusiastic support of this project, and to those colleagues, Susan among them, who offered thoughtful comments on early drafts. And finally, thanks to the many girls and boys, men and women, who served as research participants.

Illustrations by Jennifer E. Putnam
Design and Production by Jan Putnam

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This pamphlet is designed for use by parents of early adolescent girls. It is most effective when used in combination with BODY TALK For Girls Growing Up.

WHY THIS PAMPHLET?

It is tempting to interpret the increased attention to menstruation in the media as an indication of improved cultural attitudes toward menstruation. After all, current ads for menstrual products are more upbeat than their counterparts of 30 years ago. In the 50's, a haggard Peggy was puffy with periodic pain. Today, the ads for menstrual products feature physically active, sparklingly beautiful teens and young women, who obviously don't think twice about wearing white during "those days." Certainly, the picture painted in the media seems to imply that menstruation ***per se*** is no longer as embarrassing as it used to be, and that girls and women are much more comfortable with the whole process.

Although it may seem as though we talk more openly about menstruation today, if you look closely at what is being said, you'll notice that the event is still being defined in negative terms. Although public advertisements for menstrual products are prolific, products are still described as successful to the extent that they help to "prevent accidents," and product information continues to emphasize menstruation as a crisis in hygiene. Girls and women are urged to keep clean and, further, to "act normal" so no one will know. The implication is that there is something both dirty and abnormal about menstruation. Finally, the abundance of derogatory terms used in the culture to refer to menstruation is a further indication of our continued discomfort with it.

From research about the psychological meaning of menstruation to girls and women that has been undertaken recently, there is evidence to suggest that today's young girls—unlike those portrayed in the flashy menstrual product ads—are not wholly nonchalant about menstruation. [1]

Indeed, our work with early adolescent girls aged 11 to 14 has revealed that girls do not make the adjustment to menstrual life casually. [2,3]

In our work,[4] we ask girls directly about what they know about and think about menstruation. Many are reluctant to answer these questions, one indication of their discomfort with menstruation. Many girls write in negative comments instead of answers to specific questions.

What do girls know about menstruation? When we look at the responses of the girls who do answer the questions we ask—for instance, about what causes menstruation, how long it lasts, how much blood is lost and how menstrual products are used—we find, not surprisingly, that older girls are more accurate than younger girls. With regard to specifics, more girls know how often menstruation occurs and how long a menstrual period lasts, but far fewer give an accurate description of what causes menstruation, how menstrual products are used, or how much blood is lost.

How do girls react to menstruation? In general, girls have mixed reactions.[5] On the one hand, girls think that menstruation is normal and that it is a sign of growing up. At the same time, they are worried about menstruation. They wonder what to do, for instance, if they get their period in the middle of class, or if they stain their clothing. These are only two of a number of specific concerns about actually coping with menstruation. In addition, girls' attitudes toward menstruation change throughout early adolescence. The timing of menarche—or first menstruation—makes a difference. Our work suggests that early maturers (for example, sixth graders who are already menstruating) are more worried about menstruation than their grademates who have not yet begun to menstruate. [2,3]

Young premenarcheal girls with whom we worked (fifth or sixth graders, for example, who have not yet had a first period) were preoccupied with wanting to know exactly when their first period would be. These girls, in the absence of actual experience, were full of "what if" and "how" questions. Yet, in the forum we provided, these same girls revealed that they did not know how to go about asking them. Many—far more than we would have thought—could not imagine asking their mother (or the school nurse or a teacher) for help in getting information or in getting menstrual products for practice ahead of time.

We've learned that newly postmenarcheal girls are also reticent about asking adults for more information about menstruation. Although newly postmenarcheal girls have the benefit of some concrete experience with menstruation, new concerns surface as a result of that experience. One practical problem these girls told us about had to do with the lack of private access to menstrual products in school. Too often in elementary, junior high and middle schools, there are no machines dispensing menstrual products in the girls' lavatories. Girls who need supplies must often rely on the school nurse or sometimes the school secretary (someone with whom they may not have a satisfactory personal relationship) to provide them. Remembering to bring supplies from home takes time and a good deal of planning ahead—a cognitive skill that early adolescents are just beginning to use. In addition, bringing one's own supplies presents girls with the additional burden making sure that their pads and tampons don't fall out of the bookbag, purse, or locker at an inappropriate time. Girls we've worked with dislike these difficulties. They wish that it were easier for them to manage their periods in school, and having private access to supplies would help.

But these girls, though "experienced," were just as speechless as premenarcheal girls in attempting to communicate their concerns to adults who might be able to offer them some assistance.

It is unfortunate that children seem to have no words to ask adults for help in coping with a normal, biological function that helps to define physical maturity for half the human species. And if they have no words to ask for help with menstruation, how are they ever going to manage to ask for our help in dealing with other aspects of growing up?

We realize, from talking with parents as well as early adolescents, that many adults have no words with which to begin or maintain such conversations. In our work with young people, we let them know that there are many parents who feel just as tongue-tied as they do when talking about menstruation or other aspects of puberty. In the companion pamphlets for young people (see **Body Talk for Girls Growing Up** and **Body Talk for Boys Growing Up**), we describe several strategies that we hope will help early adolescents identify their questions and obtain the information they seek. Parents are featured as a resource to be tapped, and specific suggestions for initiating a conversation with Mom or Dad are highlighted. In this pamphlet, we offer a similar set of suggestions for adults. We hope these suggestions will help you in developing some strategies for talking with your daughter, in particular, about menstruation. It is our further hope that these strategies will continue to be of use in future talks with her about other aspects of growing up.

When is the Best Time to Introduce the Topic to Girls?

Ideally, girls should know about menstruation before they have their first period. Research has indicated that girls who feel better prepared for menstruation are more positive about menarche than girls who feel less well prepared.[6] While the average age of menarche in this country is about 12.6 years, predicting the age at which your daughter will experience her first menstruation is ***not*** an exact science. Menstruation is a relatively ***late*** event in the sequence of pubertal changes, occurring most often after other changes such as a growth spurt and/or the development of secondary sex characteristics (the appearance of pubic hair, the development of breast buds, for example). So one way to estimate your daughter's menarche is to notice how many other aspects of pubertal growth she has experienced. Another handy predictor is mother's age at menarche. If Mom was an early or late maturer, chances are that the daughter will be too.

Researchers have not determined the exact pattern of biological events leading to menarche, but there is some evidence to suggest that the fat-to-muscle ratio may be an important factor.[8] It is thought that, in addition to influences like body type and genetic makeup, menstruation may not occur unless there is a certain proportion of fat in comparison to muscle content within the body. This may explain why taller, leaner girls tend to begin to menstruate when they are a bit older while shorter, heavier girls menstruate at younger ages. Menstruation can occur as early as age 8 and as late as age 16 or 17. In our study,[4] about 19 percent of the girls had had a first period by the beginning of sixth grade while six percent had not yet begun by the end of ninth grade.

If you are the parent of a fourth or fifth grade girl, now is the time to start thinking about what you'd like to say to her about menstruation. In general, preparation for menstruation during the upper elementary grades will reach ***most*** girls prior to their own first experience. If you think your daughter may be an early maturer, you may want to plan to talk to her even sooner.

Which Parent Takes Responsibility for Menstrual Education?

At first glance this may seem like a silly question—the answer is Mom, of course. It is true that girls consider Mom as the most important source of information about menstruation [9] and report that fathers have played virtually no role in menstrual education. This makes sense. After all, Mom is the expert who can draw on her own experience. While we assume that Mom will continue to take the primary responsibility for a daughter's menstrual education, we'd like to suggest that fathers can participate more actively in their daughters' menstrual education. As we'll soon describe in more detail, girls with whom we've worked have expressed an interest in a father's perspective on menstruation. In particular, girls have been curious to know about Dad's reactions to menstruation when he was younger and dating.

What Are Your Own Attitudes Toward Menstruation?

Before planning the specifics of a talk with your daughter about menstruation, we suggest that you think a little bit about your own attitudes towards—and experience of—menstruation. Although some of the following questions are more appropriate for mothers and others for fathers, all are intended to help both parents focus on their own feelings and reactions to menstruation. (Note: this is an exercise—there are no right or wrong or socially preferred answers to these questions.)

- Do you talk about menstruation openly in your family or with friends?

- Does anyone/everyone in your family know when Mom has her period?
- Where does Mom keep her supplies?
- Is disposing of used supplies a big issue—that is, how would other family members react to seeing a used pad or tampon at the top of the trash basket in the bathroom?
- Has Mom been in situations when she's bled through? Has Dad seen that happen to her or to someone else? What happened? How did people feel about it?
- Does either parent remember if the children had questions about menstruation when they were much younger—as preschoolers, for example?
- Does your daughter already know about Mom's first period? What was it like?
- Do both parents know about their own mother's first period, or about how she managed her menstruation, or what she thought about menstruating?

For Dad:

- What are your reactions to your wife's periods—to your wife during her periods?

Now think for a moment about your daughter menstruating. Try to answer the following question before reading what other mothers said.

Is There Anything That Makes You Uncomfortable Or Sad About Your Daughter Menstruating?

Some mothers we talked to mentioned being sad because their daughter's "coming of age" made them realize that time was passing—their child was growing up and they themselves were getting older. Others saw their daughter making a

transition from childhood (a state of innocence) to a more vulnerable state—one in which new worries associated with sexuality (like pregnancy and AIDS) awaited. Other mothers were worried for themselves; they did not look forward to having to address their daughter's questions about sexuality. "If only," said one mother, "you didn't have to explain the part about the unfertilized egg. That's where it all gets sticky—to have to explain menstruation *and* sex at the same time!" Other mothers mentioned being sad because they felt that, even though menstruating was a sign of physical maturity, thinking of their newly-menstruating daughter as sexually mature seemed premature. Some others mentioned that they were afraid that menstruating would distance a daughter from her father.

What Are Some of the Positive Thoughts You Have About It?

Some mothers in our study told us that they felt they would interpret their daughters' menstruation as a sign of normal, healthy physical development. Others mentioned that once their daughters began to menstruate they thought they would be more alike somehow—and have a closer relationship as a result. Others looked forward to welcoming their daughters to the world of "womanhood"—and relating to them in a new way that was based on the broader interests of women in general.

What Specifically Do You Want Your Daughter To Know About Menstruation?

Now that you've explored your feelings about your own and your daughter's menstruation, it may be easier to begin to plan the specifics of what you want to say. Before consulting the experts for their advice (and keeping your own thoughts and feelings in mind), what do you think young premenarcheal girls should be told about menstruation? Make a list of the things you think they should know. Don't worry for the moment about having to be the teacher.

Now that you've made your list, think about being the teacher. You are experienced with menstruation, ***but can you explain it?*** Fortunately, you have many resources to draw upon as you plan. We've included within this pamphlet a list of books we think are excellent sources of information about menstruation and other aspects of puberty for early adolescents and their parents. Some encourage the parent and child to read along together. We like these books because the reading level is appropriate for most upper elementary school students, the material is not too technical, and the authors display a sense of humor. In addition, most emphasize the ***variation*** in development. Too often, books or magazine articles over-generalize. In comparing herself to the "typical" case, a girl whose experience does not match exactly can wonder about being normal.

These books provide lots of concrete information. While early adolescents are beginning to make the transition to abstract thinking, they still rely heavily on the here and now. Consequently, many of their concerns are practical. While a girl may be ***vaguely*** interested in her identity as a "woman" as a result of menstruating, she will be ***vitally*** concerned about how to get the necessary supplies should she get her period in the middle of the fourth quarter of the big game at school.

What Do Girls Want to Know?

We asked ninth grade girls (all of whom had experienced menarche) what they would say if they were given an opportunity to prepare other, younger girls for their first menstruation—and what advice they would give to parents who want to help their daughters have an easier first menstruation.

Before we tell you what girls told us, make a list of what you think girls most want to know. Ask yourself: Is there any question you're dreading?

The girls who answered our question about how parents could be more helpful with a girl's first period had a variety of responses, within which three main messages emerged. Girls felt: 1) that information about menstruation should emphasize normality (that it happens to all girls and not to worry); 2) that girls should be told about the mechanics of how and why it happens (including how often it occurs, how long it lasts, how much blood is lost, about the possibility of cramps); and 3) that girls should be given information about what products to use during menstruation and how to use them.

When asked what parents could do to make a first period easier for a girl, about two-thirds of the girls reported that they expected substantial involvement from mothers. These girls thought it most important for mothers to be supportive, open, and informative. They mentioned that mothers should talk about more than just the mechanics of menstruation with their daughters—that is, they should also talk about the emotional aspects of menstruation. Finally, girls urged mothers to emphasize normality by telling daughters not to be ashamed or worried or upset.

About one-third of the girls cautioned mothers against "overwhelming" their daughters. More specifically, these girls felt mothers should ask daughters whether or not they needed or wanted advice—and that mothers should avoid making a big deal or getting too "mushy" about it (for instance, by treating it as a "special secret"). Some girls mentioned how important it was for mothers not to tell all of the other relatives once the daughter started her periods.

About one-third of the girls expected minimal involvement from fathers. These girls mentioned that they would be too embarrassed to talk to their fathers about menstruation and that they saw no reason for fathers to discuss it since they didn't do it. But, surprisingly, almost half of the girls had suggestions for fathers so that they could better help their daughters with menstruation. Of these, some mentioned that fathers—like mothers—should be supportive, tolerant, open and informative. They, too, should avoid making a big deal out of menstruation. Some suggested that fathers should answer a girl's questions directly and not just say, "Go ask Mom." These responses led us to conclude that fathers could have more of a role in helping their daughters with questions about growing up than has been typically acknowledged.

What is the Best Approach to Take?

You may be tempted to conclude from the range of possible suggestions offered by these girls that, as parents, you face an impossible task. There is, of course, no formula that can help you be available without being too pushy—or completely informative in just the ways your daughter hopes you will be. While no one path to effective communication emerges from the suggestions offered, the ***number*** of suggestions given indicates that girls are receptive to further communication with parents—and that a ***variety*** of techniques for better communication are available.

In thinking about how to communicate with your daughter, it is important to remember that no one approach can be described as foolproof. So much depends on other factors—for instance, on the ways in which you and your daughter already communicate about other, even less sensitive, issues.

With regard to menstruation, these factors may be important to you and your child: Is there an older sister in the house who has already experienced menstruation? Is your talk with your daughter likely to be the first time she's heard about menstruation? Is your daughter likely to be an early or a later maturer? What kinds of conversations between you and your daughter will be helpful to her after she begins to menstruate?

This last question is especially important. Parents and teachers often feel that they've fulfilled their responsibility if they provide girls with some information about menstruation before they have a first period. As we've mentioned, once menstruation begins, other questions and concerns surface and need to be addressed. Too often there is no forum—either in school or at home—in which a newly-menstruating girl can participate in ***ongoing*** discussion about adjusting to menstrual life. Similarly, the concerns of the late maturer may not surface until several years after an introductory talk about menstruation. Because we've learned that girls' attitudes toward menstruation can change in subtle ways throughout early adolescence, we advocate thinking of menstrual education as a ***continuing*** process that, at best, begins well before a girl starts to menstruate, and extends throughout adolescence.

Thinking of menstrual education as a continuing process can take the pressure off both girls and parents. Parents can be more relaxed in any one talk if they know that they'll have other opportunities to provide the information they want to convey. And, if one approach doesn't seem to work, they can always try another.

Girls, too, can be more relaxed about learning about menstruation if they realize that they'll have several—not just one—opportunity to take it all in. If you think about how long it takes kids to learn something as unemotionally charged as long division, it becomes immediately obvious that more than one lesson on menstruation makes sense!

What Are Some of the Ways to Facilitate Communication?

Some logistical planning can help. In our work with young people, we encourage them to think about the logistics of having an important talk with a parent (see the accompanying **Body Talk** pamphlet for girls growing up), and we would urge you to do the same. Before you have your talk, think about these things:

1) Decide what it is you want to talk about.

Do you want to impart information about menstruation to your daughter?

Do you want to obtain information from your daughter—for instance, about what she already knows about menstruation or, if she's newly menstruating, about how she's managing in general or at school?

Is this likely to be the first time your daughter has heard about menstruation?

If you are dealing with another topic in the future, think about your comfort level with that topic. As we asked you to think about menstruation, ask yourself what your own feelings and attitudes are about whatever you are going to discuss before you set out to do it.

2) Think about the context of the conversation.

Are you initiating the conversation?

Are you responding to a specific question from your daughter?

Are you responding to a specific event (your daughter's best friend just got her period)?

3) Pick a good time to talk—for both you **and** your daughter.

Check with your daughter to make sure the time you pick is okay with her, too.

4) At a loss for how to start the conversation? Here are some opening lines that may be helpful:

A friend told me her daughter who is about your age got her first period. It made me start thinking about the physical changes that girls experience as they grow up, and talking with you about them.

I wondered if you had any questions about the physical part of growing up. I'd be happy to tell you what I know about it, or to get you some books. Maybe we could read a book together and talk about it.

I sent away for these pamphlets the other day for parents of kids just about your age . . .

I don't think I'm very good at explaining the physical part of growing up, but I want you to know that I'll try to answer your questions.

As you grow, I know you'll have lots of thoughts and questions about the new experiences you'll be having. I hope we'll be able to talk to each other about them. Sometimes, you'll bring up something for us to discuss. Sometimes I'll do it. Here's what I've been thinking about lately . . .

5) Think about the format.

Is talking the best way for you to communicate with your daughter?

Maybe writing letters back and forth, or keeping a special diary that you share is more appealing to you—or perhaps to her.

What About Men and Boys and Menstrual Education?

We hope we've encouraged you to think about an expanded role for fathers in the menstrual and pubertal education of their daughters. As we've mentioned, our interviews with girls suggest that they are more receptive to talking with fathers about these issues than we might have believed. It is true that some girls clearly do not want Mother to discuss their menstruation with fathers or brothers. If you don't know how your daughter feels about this, ask her so that you can take her feelings into consideration.

In thinking about this issue, you may be interested to know that there is research [10] to indicate that, though girls may not want to talk directly to boys, they want boys to know about menstruation—in part so that boys, like moms and dads, won't make such a big deal out of it. Unfortunately, menstrual education for boys is almost non-existent, both in the home and at school. Although more attention is now given in the schools to pubertal education than was the case even 15 years ago, most health education programs are far from comprehensive and many questions are left unanswered.[11] While there is currently no way of knowing much about the scope and content of particular courses, it may be said that typical programs consist of segregated discussions about topics pertinent to same-sex development. In the face of too much to teach and too much to learn in the time alloted, questions about opposite-sex development are not often prominent. As a result, boys have little opportunity to learn about what girls experience—and, by the same token, girls have little opportunity to learn about what boys experience.

Lack of information, however, does not prevent the development of strong opinions and attitudes about the development of the opposite sex. In interviews with college-aged males (most of whom were lucky enough to have at least one introductory school lecture on menstruation in the late elementary or junior high school grades), many young men reported that their first reactions to menstruation included disgust (at the blood) and fear (because they thought girls were in pain).[12] Although these initial reactions gave way to less charged responses to menstruation later in adolescence as a result of talking openly with a trusted girlfriend about menstruation, this and other research has shown a difference between females' and males' perceptions of the impact of menstruation on girls and women. In general, males think that menstruation is more debilitating than females report it to be.[13]

In talking with early adolescents we've learned that both boys and girls have questions about physical changes—their own and those of the opposite sex. Early adolescent boys have questions about menstruation. One 10 year old boy, for example, had heard that he should try to be nice to girls when they were menstruating. This he was prepared to do except, "How do you know when they're doing it?," he asked.

It is our belief that more comprehensive pubertal education for both boys and girls should serve to help each group understand what the other experiences. Further understanding about what the opposite sex experiences should help to reduce the awkwardness and teasing between the sexes that not only characterizes early adolescence but poses an added burden for young people during this time.

Toward this end, we suggest that parents think about addressing girls' development as part of their sons' pubertal education, and vice verse. If you have a son as well as a daughter, we urge you to talk with him about menstruation and other aspects of girls' development—both for his own and his sister's benefit.

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4. Grant 16034 from the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development to Drs. Jill Rierdan and Elissa Koff has supported an ongoing program of research involving over 600 early adolescent girls, aged 11 through 14. The project, housed at the Wellesley College Center for Research on Women, Wellesley, MA 02181, continues to provide information about early adolescent girls' development. Drs. Rierdan and Koff are the project's principal investigators. The author served as research associate on the project from 1982-1989 and was responsible for data collection and management, and for communication with school personnel, girls and their families.

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POSTSCRIPT

I hope this pamphlet has provided you with some food for thought about how you might initiate some discussion with your child about one aspect of pubertal development.

I hope also that it has provided you with some useful information about menarche and menstruation, in particular, and that the suggestions for communicating about this aspect of development will be useful to you as you continue talking with your children about other aspects of growing up.

I'm interested in your reactions and thoughts about this pamphlet. Please let me know what you think by writing to me at the following address:

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BODY TALK pamphlets may be ordered from the Publications Department, Center for Research on Women, Wellesley College, Wellesley, MA 02181

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